

Puzzle-solving experiments in literature: postmodern problems

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Abstract. In this paper, I try to illustrate the difficulties of attempting literary experiments to determine why a seemingly good work was not embraced by a wider reading public, focusing on Max Beerbohm's pastiche book *A Christmas Garland*.

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Between it and the many there is some rift

But we enjoy this Christmas gift

I believe there is literature, in a prestigious sense, which is written with a sense of certainty: "This is certainly a good book. Why is it not for sale in mainstream bookshops anymore? Why have the wider literature reading public turned away from it?" Starting with this puzzle, one begins experiments, writing variations on the book in search of what the missing factor might be. In this paper, I wish to illustrate some of the difficulties with realizing the aspiration of changing one factor while holding other factors in place.

Let us imagine that our sense of certainty is directed at Max Beerbohm's 1912 book *A Christmas Garland*, which imitates the styles of various authors of his day, many of whom are still famous. Why is this text so little known today? Why is it not for sale in the mainstream bookshops? And what can one do to investigate the matter by means of a successor? "It is like reading bits and bobs from different authors, though it is actually by one," one anticipates some reader responding dismissively to

Beerbohm's book, instead of enjoying the skill. Is that the problem? One thing a puzzled author-critic might therefore do is produce a series of imitations but add a narrative joining the imitations together into a whole.¹ The narrative will hopefully overcome that dismissal. In the successor work, the imitations appear as stories within a story, for example the overall story focuses on a reviewer for a literary magazine and includes the fictions they had to read, and these fictions imitate the styles of various notable authors.

Let us say that one does the writing in the 1970s or 1980s or 90s even. One also judges that the time is ripe for such a book of imitations, because "everywhere" there is talk of the postmodern. What is the postmodern? Well, a number of new and strange styles appeared during modernism but the postmodern period is one which is skeptical about being able to pioneer new styles. The avant-gardes are laughed at (Lyotard 2001 [1979]: 1614). Instead all that can be done is imitate old styles or combine old styles in unusual ways. The planned book will fit well with that trend. But then, if the book is successful, how will one know if it is the narrative gluing the imitations together which made the difference or merely being in line with the trend?

Well, here is an answer. "The postmodernist is also against grand narratives, such as a theory which provides a grand narrative of history, explaining why one period was followed by another: the feudal period by the capitalist period say. So the postmodernist will find this book objectionable for its narrative linking together different imitations? So any success will not be due to just fitting with the new trend, because it is a partial fit. In one respect there is a fit (all these pastiches), in another

¹ I once mentioned to someone a sequence of imitations in a notable modernist novel, moving from old English to the present, and she responded that this can also be done in her own native language – unimpressed. That suggests a different explanation: "At that level, or with that 'trick,' I buy local and Beerbohm is not my people." As long as you accept that in return!

respect not (the narrative linking them together). The work should be more fragmentary to be properly postmodern.” But then if the effort fails, could one not say that trends of the time were opposed to the project, which would have flourished in other periods?

It is difficult to resist certain experiments to determine why a book was not successful, but there are a lot of difficulties with getting a clear result, where we can say, “This was the missing factor in the earlier work.” I suppose this is obvious, but I hope some readers enjoyed the illustration. Even natural science research may not often be so different.

References

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